"T'serek's young yet. He'll have plenty of chances to collect hardware. I don't want to create a gloryhound. I'm not saying he is one, but there are times when a live coward is worth six heroes. I want to be sure he knows that. Do you think I'm being too hard on him?"

Lapsley considered. He was a pretty fair field psychiatrist himself.

"No, I don't think there's any danger, but it won't hurt him to wait."

"Good. I appreciate it."

But he didn't appreciate his own duplicity. It left a bad taste in his mouth and the feeling of unfinished business.

The second time T'serek's name came up for a commendation it was McCoy who filed the report. When Kirk failed to take action, he followed up by buzzing Kirk's door with two glasses in one hand and a bottle of brandy in the other.

"Ah, a semi-professional visit, I take it?" Kirk let the doctor in and settled across the desk from him while he poured. He had been fighting shy of McCoy as well as Spock and had known that it wouldn't go without comment from that sector. Well, maybe it was time to turn the rocks over and see what scuttled out.

McCoy began by explaining that the lab specimen from Hagen's world wasn't dangerous, that the lab crew had made a pet of it.

"But what would you do if a flying snake started divebombing sickbay, Jim? T'serek wasn't even there on duty. I simply left him standing in the lab, and the next thing he knew the snake was loose and heading for the door spraying green mist. When he hit the emergency seal and locked himself in with it he was taking quite a chance. And it would have created a panic in sickbay. Someone could have been seriously hurt."

"I agree he deserves a commendation. I'll log it."

"You seem pretty cool. I thought you liked him." McCoy leaned back, the picture of a perfect listener. Kirk recognized the posture. All right, Bones, you be the devil's advocate.

"It's not my job to like promising young officers. It's my job to make sure they live up to the promise when the time comes."

"And it's my job to be aware of personality clashes on this ship. T'serek seems to have more than his share. I just didn't know you'd joined the opposition. Is he making progress too fast to suit you?"

"If you mean faster than I did, Doctor, say so!"

Two tempers were ruffled at this point; both of them recognized it at the same time. Kirk reached back to rub his neck and McCoy looked thoughtfully at the wall.

"Well, you can't ignore him, can you?" Kirk conceded ruefully. "Am I really harder on people I like?"

"Merciless. It's no crime to have sex appeal."

"On duty it is."

"I think this came up before, Jim. You're a little touchy on the subject, aren't you?"

Kirk cast a fulminating glance at McCoy, then puffed his cheeks and vented some of his steam in a soundless whistle. McCoy was only doing his job.

"Maybe I am. But I'm not jealous of T'serek. And I know he isn't doing it deliberately. It's just <u>there</u>, Bones. You can't help but feel it. Hell, you're the one who pointed it out to me. When he comes into a room, everybody's temperature goes up."

"Including yours," said McCoy as a statement. "Surprise you?"

Kirk studied his drink. "My psychfile says I could go that way, doesn't it?"

"Most of us could if T'serek were available."

Kirk ignored this red herring. "If so, and I'll take that evasion as an affirmative, Doctor, why not until now? I've had chances."

"With someone like Dray? Not a sexual cripple, a loser, a climber or a clinger? <u>Have</u> you had a chance with a real winner--as the dominant partner?"

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "If that's your opinion, it's not very flattering."

McCoy held up an open palm. "It's not my opinion that matters, Jim. What do you think?"

Kirk felt the color in his face, conceded it with a jerk of his chin as he finished his drink. "All right. I'm a self-centered bastard and I like to be on top. Rumor says it knocks a little of the stardust off if you aren't."

"That went out with chattel ownership of wives. It takes two. If there were nothing in the game for half the players, the human race would have died out long ago."

"Women are different," said Kirk.

"So's everybody. Do you think you really command with your balls? What's that make Nadia Palevi--a little something to up your game total?"

"Christ, no!" A little kneejerk there, Captain? Is that why he's pushing so hard? Do you keep score? His face sobered, frown lines deepening between his brows as he remembered Nadia's sweet sharing. Had he used her? No more than she used him. Less than love, more than acquaintance. He owed no debts there. "No, I don't believe that. Half the women in the crew turn me on, probably more of the men than I've ever admitted, but hell, Bones, I get less than half the crotch jockeys on this ship and you know it. No time. No energy--and if I had it, that wouldn't give me the right to make the crew my private hunting preserve. I'm responsible for them."

He was looking into some interior dimension now, and missed the subtle signs that showed McCoy was already satisfied.

"Dray wouldn't take advantage, and I wouldn't favor him, but that's now how other people would see it, and it wouldn't be good for the ship. And we're not here to play. The job has to come <u>first</u> with me. Anybody looking for total commitment comes right up against that in the end. What's left over isn't much to share."

He brought himself back from the middle distance and focused on McCoy who silently poured him another inch of brandy.